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AUTHOR Stovall, Richard L.
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ABSTRACT

Issue management oriented public relations provides an excellent pedagogical device for anyone interested in the application of argumentation. This can be illustrated by a case study in which a commercial metals company was wrongly accused of improperly disposing of toxic waste at a particular site. To counter the bad publicity that followed the accusation and the investigation by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the company worked with a public relations firm in a process of inquiry to locate and define the problem, discover its extent, and define possible solutions. They then sent press releases that indicated no wrongdoing and that the company fully intended to defend that position to the local and national press. On the heels of the news release an advertisement was placed in the local paper which addressed several questions of inquiry in an open and honest manner. The ad focused on the nature and extent of the problem while allowing the reader to explore the problem with the company, and while pledging honesty, cooperation, and environmentally safe action. As a result of the ad much of the news coverage became more favorable toward the company, the local Chamber of Commerce came to their aid, and business returned to levels approaching normal. Later, a jury cleared the company of wrongdoing. This case provides students with an opportunity to see questions of inquiry eliminating hundreds of needless contentions before corporate advocacy began. It also illustrates that it is time to re-establish inquiry as an inherent part of argumentation. (PRA)

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ARGUMENTATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

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Dr. Richard L. Stovall

Southwest Missouri State University

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ARGUMENTATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Some of my colleagues, especially those from departments where old and new rhetorics do not meet, may find it strange or amusing that argumentation and public relations are considered in the same research spectrum. Nevertheless, the relationship between public relations and argumentation is not a product of the 1990's. As early as 1981 Dr. David Thomas acknowledged that forensics and debate experience represented "a highly relevant educational program for future corporate advocates..." (p.9).

He went on to indicate he believed argumentation to be at the heart of issue management relying on carefully conducted research. My interpretation of "research" as related to the concept of issue management means asking the right questions. In short, the process or inquiry preceding the point of corporate advocacy.

Scholars in issue management treat research as a matter of inquiry often referred to as trending. Only three years after Thomas noted the pedagogical linkage of argumentation and public relations, David Bernstein (1984) in his book Corporate Image and Reality, complained that inquiry tended to be limited to crisis management.

> Similarly research is often undertaken only when problems arise. The research company is expected to diagnose the patient with no access to his medical record-and do it in the ambulance on the way to the

hospital, or ad agency, where the creative team stand ready with the coloured band aid. Research at this stage is nearly always too little and invariably too late. Research, like corporate communication, generally has to take place in good times before bad. The good time research may warn a company of the bad times or prevent them. It will detect problem areas and audiences which the company doesn't suspect -and potential advantages too. It will provide norms against which targets can be set. (p. 206)

Bernstein's description of research suggests that crises often lead to advocacy without adequate time for inquiry. Advocates soon discovered the right questions had not been asked prior to the moment a public statement became necessary. Evidence had not been collected and good reasons had not been prepared to support claims because inquiry had not proceeded advocacy.

When issue managers began to recognize the need to inquire and ask questions such as, "What is the nature and scope of the problem," scholars began to focus on writing about managing and monitoring of issues. Heath and Nelson (1986) noted:

> The key to planning is having research data that indicate the lay of the public policy land....Issue management involves the use of surveys and audits but goes far beyond them. Rather than treating opinion as mere response items on a survey, the preferred

approach is to understand how response items cluster into arguments. To understand an opinion, issue managers must be able to comprehend the depth and breadth of the opinion position as comprehensive thoughts or arguments. (p.162)

In recent years corporations have learned the necessity of inquiry. Inquiry is often labeled "trending" or "mapping." No clearer example can be found than Joseph F. Cates and Jennifer Jarratt's contribution to the Strategic Management. The title "Mapping the Issues of an Industry: An Exercise in Issues Identification," sounds very similar to argumentation textbook chapters entitled Analysis or Finding the issues. Specifically, they establish topoi for the mapping of issues, or what a debater might call stock issue analysis.

> Some issues are sharply localized or even company - or site - specific; others repeat over a substantial number of organizations or locations; and still others are industry wide. Some issues are so widespread as to cut across many industries and organizations. Consequently, attempts to map the problems of an industry may prove challenging and the lessons may be generalized to many other sectors.
>
> Among the specific question to be looked at as a result of such mapping are:
>
> Whether the issues for a company are the same as or

different from the issues for an industry.

How widespread an issue may be.

To what extent the concept "emerging issue" is useful or misleading for an industry or company.

Whether mapping the industry's problem has specific implications for the company.

Whether mapping has specific implications for industrial associations.

Whether people inside and outside an industry see the same issues in the same way. (pp.122-23)

Issue management further lends itself to the process of inquiry by using "stock issue" questions to gauge risk assessment and program initiation. Heath and Nelson (1986) note:

> Issue change strategy options (priority-setting considerations) involve deciding which issues the organization will commit to and in what manner. Key criteria in this stage...are risks involved in undertaking the campaign, confidence in information, accuracy of forecasts likelihood the situation will correct itself, timing, and the direction the situation is likely to take. Reactive, adaptive, and dynamic (pro-active) opinions exist. (p. 164-65)

Heath and Nelson bridge the gap from inquiry to advocacy in their analysis of the issue action campaign. What they are teaching is similar to plan meet need,

workability arguments, and case construction; concepts familiar to any debater.

> An issue action program involves elements of communication and of the corporate behavior campaign designed to correct a given situation. It begins with the setting of goals and the discussion of strategies necessary to effect the desired change. Here the matrix comes into full effect, because a variety of disciplines are needed to determine the nature of the corporate response. This process lays the foundation for determining the targeted audiences, designing messages, and selecting channels that are helpful in reaching the audience. All of this is monitored to determine whether the campaign is meeting its goals. (p.165)

In summary,it would seem that issue management oriented public relations would provide an excellent pedagogical device for anyone interested in the application of argumentation. However, all the above material resides in the realm of the theoretical. Certainly, some concepts work in theory but not in practice. I want to now move to a case study to illustrate a practical application of the concepts discussed.

The information contained in the following case study is used with the permission of Commercial Metals Company and Halcyon Public Relations both of Dallas, Texas. Since

I served as a consultant to Halcyon, it should be noted that information contained in the case study is often personal knowledge not readily available from local newspaper sources.

CASE STUDY

Prior to June 26, 1988 an employee of Karchmer Iron and Metal of Springfield, Missouri phoned the parent company, Commercial Metals, in Dallas to tell them that should they fail to offer him additional workman's compensation he would tell a Springfield television station that he had dumped toxic waste at the Karchmer facility. Commercial Metals considered the employee's threat nothing more than attempted extortion.

On June 26, 1988 the Environmental Protection Agency with the assistance of the Federal Bureau of Investigation served a search warrant on Karchmers. The plant site was closed, workers were sent home, and the EPA used a backhoe to dig for the next two days. At the end of this period, the EPA advised Commercial Metals the agency had completed the investigation, any findings would be reported to a Grand Jury currently in session, and the job site was no more dangerous than it was before the agency began the digging operations.

In addition to the presence of the "moon suited" EPA workers and the FBI, local media encamped on the gate on the Karchmer facility. All news reports focused on the toxic waste search. Television carried video tape footage

of the digging while the local newspaper carried still photos, and radio reporters did remotes from the search operation.

During the two days of digging, Commercial Metals brought many of its top executives to Springfield along with several company attorneys to work in conjunction with Halcyon Public Relations. In a hotel room less than a mile from the search operation and only a few hundred feet from the U.S. Court House the process of inquiry was begun. Company and public relations experts worked diligently to implement Commercial Metals preparedness plan.

1. How could we locate and define the problem? The apparent problem was that Karchmer and its parent corporation, Commercial Metals, was receiving negative publicity as a result of the EPA investigation. We could define the problem as one of image. It was also defined as a company wrongfully accused. But, to tell how the company was wrongly accused could lead to other problems such as being interpreted as an attempt to intimidate witnesses and divulging evidence that might later be of absolute necessity in a court trial.

2. What was the extent of the problem? What did exploration of the problem reveal? First, the extent of the problem was beyond the scope of Springfield, Missouri, since Commercial Metals had noticed fluctuation in stock prices. Also, local clients of Karchmer were sending

empty barrels to competing scrap metal firms that were not under investigation.

3. What were the potential solutions? Halcyon prepared a series of press releases for company officials. Each release took a different degree of confrontation with government agencies and their investigation. Once Commercial Metals officials agreed on a press release, Halcyon went on to prepare ad copy consistent with the press release.

Once the company believed the best position was chosen the press release was released simultaneous to the local press, AP and UPI, as well as Financial News Network. In summary that release indicated no wrong doing by Commercial Metals and that the company intended to fully defend that position.

On the heels of the news release an ad was placed in the Springfield News Leader of July 2, 1988. The ad entitled, "To Our Neighbors in Springfield," addressed several questions of inquiry in an open and honest manner.

> No doubt, you've read or heard a lot about problems at our Karchmer Iron and Metal facility in Springfield over the past few days. No doubt, what you have read or heard has caused you concern. We understand-and share-your concern. It is alleged that hazardous waste materials were improperly disposed of at one particular area of the site. We want to make our position perfectly

clear:

+ Any improper disposition of hazardous materials directly violate company policies with call upon our people, world-wide, to operate with respect for the environment, in full accordance with all applicable laws.

+ We do not know the extent of the problem, if any, at the Karchmer facility. The Environmental Protection Agency tested the site over the week-end, but analysis of those test samples will take some time. In the meantime, we have begun our own program of testing and evaluation of the facility by independent environmental experts.

+ If any problem exists, we will immediately and completely deal with it.

+ We will continue to cooperate fully with both Federal and state officials in their investigation of this matter.

+ The facility will resume normal operations as soon as it is definitely determined that doing so would present no hazard to our employees, neighbors, visitors or the environment.

+ Through interim measures, we have resumed providing limited services to some customers and are exploring other interim alternatives that would allow us to service our remaining customers.

Karchmer has done business in Springfield since

1912. We place great value on our reputation as a good corporate citizen and as a responsible operator. We intend to retain that reputation, not only in Springfield, but everywhere Commercial Metals Company operates.

We greatly appreciate the support through the years of our many customers, employees and friends throughout the area, and we look forward to returning-as quickly as possible-to our role as a fully productive part of the Springfield, area economy. (1988, July) Springfield News Leader. p.B4.

As one can readily discern, this ad focuses on the nature and extent of the problem, a problem not fully defined at this point. Second the ad allows the reader to explore the problem with the company while Commercial Metals pledges honesty, cooperation, and environmentally safe action. Ultimately, the ad proposes that customers can be served and there is no reason to avoid the interim place of business.

As a result of this ad much of the news coverage became more favorable toward Commercial Metals. The Chamber of Commerce came to their aid and business returned to levels approaching normal. Not only was Commercial Metals pleased with the immediate outcome they were even more pleased when a jury cleared the company of all wrong doing.

This case study provides the student with an

opportunity to see questions of inquiry eliminating hundreds of needless contentions before corporate advocacy began. I do not disagree with the proposition that intercollegiate debate is one of the most important activities in which one can engage. I do not disagree with the proposition that argumentation is one of the most important courses one can take. However, as presently constituted argumentation and intercollegiate debate sacrifice inquiry for advocacy. It is time to re-establish inquiry as an inherent part of argumentation.

To me, issue management is an ideal location to begin a return to the concept of "academic" debate. Here is an opportunity to employ the testing of reasoning and evidence to support claims. Here is an opportunity to learn a process that is invaluable to all human endeavors that rest on decision making. Here is an opportunity to move to the future with a return to the past. Here, then, is the opportunity to return inquiry to the critical decision making process.

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